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Sixth Graders in Middle Schools Fare Worse Than Peers in Elementary Schools, Study Finds

Study also finds that the negative effects of grouping sixth graders with older students are lasting and persist at least through ninth grade

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DURHAM, NC -- Sixth graders placed in middle schools have more discipline problems and lower test scores than their peers who attend elementary schools, according to a study by researchers at Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley.

In addition, the negative effects of grouping sixth graders with older students are lasting and persist at least through ninth grade.

"These findings cast serious doubt on the wisdom of the historic nationwide shift to the grades 6-8 middle school format," said Philip Cook, Duke professor of public policy and economics and an author of the paper.

In the 1970s, less than 25 percent of middle schools included sixth grade. Now, the figure is 75 percent nationwide and 90 percent in North Carolina, which has led the trend toward grades 6-8 middle schools. The shift took place in part due to school population pressures, but also because educators believed it was developmentally appropriate.

"What's been lacking in the debate is any real data on how the school configuration affects student behavior and performance," Cook said. "As it turns out, moving sixth grade out of elementary school appears to have had substantial costs."

Jacob Vigdor and Clara Muschkin, Cook's colleagues at Duke's Sanford Institute of Public Policy, and Robert MacCoun of UC Berkeley co-authored the report, "Should Sixth Grade Be in Elementary or Middle School? An Analysis of Grade Configuration and Student Behavior." The report is available online as a Sanford Institute working paper at www.pubpol.duke.edu/research/papers/.

The researchers contrasted sixth graders attending North Carolina's grade 6-8 middle schools with those attending grade K-6 elementary schools. The data pertained to 44,709 sixth-graders in 243 schools in 99 districts.

The sixth graders attending middle school were more than twice as likely to be disciplined as those attending elementary school, after accounting for socioeconomic and demographic differences in the groups. Drug-related disciplinary incidents were nearly four times greater among the middle school group. The pattern continued as the sixth graders advanced through the grades, suggesting the problems were not tied solely to the transition to a new school environment.

In addition, sixth graders in elementary schools improved their scores on end-of-grade exams in math and reading relative to their peers in middle schools, and those gains persisted through ninth grade.

Although the study didn't pinpoint the causes for the differences, the authors concluded that the 6-8 middle school structure brought impressionable sixth graders into routine contact with older adolescents who were a bad influence. Older adolescents are more rebellious and more involved in delinquency, sex, illicit drugs and other activities that violate school rules, the authors noted.

"This points to a general pattern whereby it is better for kids to make transitions later rather than earlier," said Vigdor, a co-author. "Sixth grade is an especially vulnerable time, in the sense that sixth graders display a strong susceptibility to peer influence and the decision to expose them to slightly older or slightly younger students seems to have a lasting impact."

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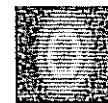
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MIDDLE SCHOOL CONFIGURATION

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MIDDLE SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

Reasons for change in configuration

A change in the recommended grade level combination began on a large scale in the early 1960's; this resulted in a shift from the 7-9 combination to a 6-8 or 5-8 configuration. This shift was based on:

- increasing evidence that children matured earlier than before
- in 1910 children reached puberty at approximately 12-14 years of age; today, most children reach puberty by age 11.
- puberty appears to start approximately four months earlier every decade
- Reasons for change in configuration
- the belief that 9th grade was more attached to high school
- more sophisticated evaluation and research methods and materials provided more accurate data

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Instruction vs. configuration

Most researchers agree that GENERALLY the QUALITY of the school and the instruction was more important than the grade configuration in viewing academic progress of students.

According to Thompson, the following played a greater role in determining academic success than did grade configuration:

- Instruction vs. configuration
- educational level of teachers
- experience of teachers
- expenditure per student
- education and occupation of parents
- Instruction vs. configuration
- length of school year
- quality of instructional materials

However, the evidence strongly supports the *social consequences* of grade level configuration. For example:

Eichorn

The school should take note of the physical, emotional, and psychological changes these children undergo and new programs should be instituted to help these students deal with the problems and confusions they experience.... today's youths interact differently with society than its counterpart did in the 1900 as a result of this dramatic trend toward earlier physical maturation coupled with the marked cultural changes that have taken place over the past sixty year period. (The Middle School.)

TEGARDEN (1976)

The learning environment prevalent in the elementary and high school does not lend itself to the peculiar needs and interests of early adolescents. What is needed is a middle level program designed to provide specifically for the transcendent youngster and staffed with sensitive, especially prepared personnel. (Tegarden)

Early adolescents share several characteristics

- desire for independence
- growth in importance of the peer group
- sexual, emotional and social maturation

- search for values and norms
- resentment of authority figures
- ambivalence concerning dependence
- emancipation from the home
- fluctuation of emotions
- concern about physical growth and appearance
- development of self concept

The Organization of the Middle Grades (p. 23)

The time of puberty is a time of intense learning when students must deal with a new body, a new world, new responsibilities, and new intellectual pursuits. The problems of puberty are compounded by periods of brain growth and plateaus; this creates difficulties for the student as well as the teacher.

Myers research (1969) supports a 6-8 middle school because of the more gradual transition from self-contained classrooms to departmental organizations.

Hillyer (1972) reported that 5th, 6th and 7th grade students (as well as 8) should be included in a middle school and that middle schools met student needs better than the elementary model.

Garner found that the largest number of students' adjustment problems occurred in a 7-8 school.

Gateman and Creek report that 6th grade was the most appropriate entry level for the middle school. Additionally, the research recommends that 5th grade teachers adopt promising middle school approaches. Gateman and Creek further report that 6th graders more closely resemble 7th graders than 5th graders in areas of personal adjustment and sense of personal freedom. Consequently, the 6th grade is the most appropriate entry level for the middle school.

The New York Middle Grade Task Force states developmentally, students in grades 6, 7, and 8 have more in common in terms of physical, social, psychological, and intellectual variables than do those in other age-grade combinations. A three year middle grade time frame allows the opportunity for strong, positive relationships to be built among students, teachers, counselors and administrators; this bonding is critical to healthy intellectual and emotional development and sets the state for future academic success and personal/social development for young adolescents. The task force recommends the ELIMINATION of fiscal incentives to build 7-9 schools and ESTABLISH incentives to build 6-8 schools.

The Mineola Union Free School District reported 11 to 14 year olds share broadly defined qualities the middle school combines into one organization and facility a school program that bridges, yet differs from the childhood (K-5) and adolescent (9-12) programs; they reported that the three grade combination provides more stability to the overall program; more time exists for the development of programs, promote teacher/pupil relationships, and provide individualized instruction to meet the highly variable needs and ability levels of this age group; the availability of guidance services is highly important; the emphasis on active student participation in interest groups and low-keyed athletics and social activities is important. Further, the report stated that the middle school facilitates the introduction in grade 6 of some staff specialization and team teaching the middle school provides an opportunity for gradual change from the self-contained classroom to complete departmentalization.

Mineola reports the following drawbacks:

- some students in grade 6 are physically immature
- some 6th graders may not be able to handle the social pressures coming from 7th and 8th graders
- having to adjust to so many teachers may be difficult for some students

The Jamesville-Dewitt Central School District adopted the 6-8 model in 1980.

Trauschke (1970) reported that:

- fifth and sixth graders were not adversely affected by middle school
- 7th and 8th graders achieved at higher levels than junior high 7th and 8th graders after two years in middle school
- middle school students showed more favorable attitudes toward school, themselves, and other students and teachers

Case's research (1970) suggested that a 5th grader in a middle school configuration is offered certain advantages not present in the elementary school.

Several studies (**Smith and Brantley**) reported better reading, science and math scores in middle schools.

Mooney (1970) reported children in the middle school achieved as well or better on the variables tested and that attendance was significantly greater than in equated regular schools.

Moss (1971) research included grade 5 in his definition of a middle school.

Hillyer's research (1972) indicated that 5th and 6th graders should be included in a middle school because the differences in the various maturity levels were greater between grades four and five than they were between either grades five and six or grades six and seven.

Schoo (1970) reported that students in a 5-8 middle school showed higher self concepts than students in other schools; concluded that 5-8 schools provide an easier transition for students from elementary schools.

The Herricks Union Free School District (1978) adopted 5-3-4 model and reported that

- the middle school reorganization can shake-up and help the adoption of more flexible teaching strategies.
- 6th graders received a more diversified curriculum and had access to a greater range of facilities
- the emphasis on guidance services for 6th graders as well as a close learning relationship with a team of teachers was beneficial
- the transition to HS was much more smooth

6-2-4 configuration

ADVANTAGES

- 7th and 8th grade pupils are given special attention
- immature 6th graders would have an additional year of elementary school
- makes for less gradual transition for pre-adolescents

DISADVANTAGES

- the revolving door effect does not allow students to identify with the school
- the largest number of students' adjustment problems occurred in this combination school
- the 7/8 combination continues the perception of a junior high school with all of its drawbacks:

Hull wrote that... the junior high school, in my opinion, may be America's greatest educational blunder... Junior Highs mimic the educational programs of high schools for a population that is not able to deal with these approaches.

- rather than providing a bridge between elementary and high school, junior highs adopt the high school programs, methodologies, etc., resulting in a more difficult transition.
- the emphasis on subject matter (as opposed to student centered program) is inappropriate for the developmental needs of the students.

5-3-4 CONFIGURATION

ADVANTAGES

- it supports the research findings which show that the youngster today enters adolescence much earlier than 50 years ago
- the students' ages more nearly parallel the period of human growth and development between childhood and adolescence - ages 11 through 13 = grades 6 through 8.
- pupils are grouped who are more alike than either elementary or secondary pupils.
- it more appropriately meets the academic needs of students.
- exposure to application skills.
- opportunity for specialization.
- availability of labs, family living, technology
- more stimulation through departmentalization, special facilities and equipment
- availability of broader curriculum
- more orderly transition (materials, instruction, expectations)
- 5th graders would have greater opportunity for leadership in elementary school
- allows students to develop identity with the building and for the faculty to get to know and work with the students
- students could have a "fresh start" a year earlier

5-3-4 CONFIGURATION

DRAWBACKS

- some 6th graders might still need the protective environment
- 6th graders would not be able to participate in some elementary programs (safety patrol, etc)
- the elementary school challenge to teachers working with children at 6th grade would be missing
- some elementary programs might be curtailed if 6th grade is no longer there

4-4-4 Configuration**Advantages**

- the advantages and disadvantages are virtually the same as those for the 5-3-4 plan. Specifically, advantages of 4-4-4 configuration:
- supports many research finding which show that today youngsters enter adolescence at an earlier age
- groups pupils who are more alike than either elementary or secondary pupils
- these pupils are at an age where they need reinforcement and extension of skills through application
- facilitates a flexibility in grouping students for instructional purposes and affords even broader curriculum offerings than 5-3-4 configuration
- provides for more orderly transition
- the middle school would have an identity of its own.

4-4-4 configuration**Disadvantages**

- some youngster students might be better off in the more protective elementary environment
- the leadership role of 5th and 6th graders would be lost to elementary schools

4-4-4 configuration**Disadvantages**

- the 4-4-4 plan assumes, without sufficient evidence, that the maturation patterns of 5th grade pupils are more like those of 6th, 7th and 8th grade students than they are like 3rd and 4th graders

GRADE CONFIGURATION	COMMENTS
Grades 7/9	1062 schools (in the 70s there were 7206 schools)
Grades 5-8	1238 schools
Grades 6-8	5882 schools and increasing rapidly
Grades 7/8	2414 and decreasing rapidly

According to the Market Data Retrieval Information Service, their figures, based on March, 1995 indicate the following:

GRADE CONFIGURATION	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
Grade 5	43
Grades 5-6	398

Grades 5-7	84
Grades 5-8	1266
Grades 5-9	4
Grade 6	132
Grades 6/7	123
Grades 6-8	6898
Grades 6-9	85
Grades 7	31
Grades 7-8	2360
Grades 7-9	1062
Grade 8	20
Grades 8-9	118

The Middle School is

- A grade pattern that begins with either the 5th or the 6th grade and ends with the 8th grade.
- An educational philosophy that emphasizes the needs and interests of the students.
- A willing attitude on the part of the staff toward instructional experimentation, open classrooms, team teaching, utilization of multimedia teaching techniques, and student grouping by talent and interest rather than age alone.
- An emphasis on individual instruction and guidance for each pupil.
- A focus on educating the whole child, not just the intellect.
- A program to help ease transition between childhood and adolescence.

A summary of the research

- The overwhelming majority of the research supports the middle school concept.
- 7/8 combination is the worst configuration available based on the current research.
- The 6-8 combination is the most common configuration at this time, as supported by current research.
- The 5-8 grouping is growing in popularity as research is becoming more supportive of this configuration based on the constantly changing needs of the students.

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Grade Organization Trends

America's middle schools in the new century: Status and progress



C. K. McEwin, T. S. Dickinson & D. M. Jenkins

School districts throughout the nation have continued to move from a two-tier (e.g., K-8, 9-12) to a three-tier (e.g., K-5, 6-8, 9-12) organizational plan. There is widespread consensus that young adolescents enrolled in the middle grades need and deserve schools devoted exclusively to their education and welfare. With the exception of a minority of school districts, the overwhelming trend in school organization has been toward separately organized middle schools containing grades 5-8 and 6-8. As shown in Table 1, the number of grades 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools has steadily increased since the 1970s.

The most significant change in the grade organization of middle schools has been the dramatic decline of grades 7-9 junior high schools. For example, there were 4,711 public junior high schools in 1970 and only 632 by 2001 (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). This decline has resulted from many factors that are reflected in the literature and not discussed here (George & Alexander, 2003). However, it is certain that the overwhelming majority of educators and other stakeholders no longer view the junior high school as a viable choice for the education of young adolescents.

The number of grades 7-8 middle schools has also decreased in the last decade. This trend is, at least partially, the result of school districts having initially moved ninth grades to high schools with long-range plans to move sixth grades to middle schools whenever circumstances permitted. In many instances, this movement of sixth grade to the middle schools took several years since the plan often included new construction and/or major reorganizations of school districts.

The trend away from grades 7-8 middle schools is also likely due, in part, to the recognition of the importance of avoiding two-grade schools whenever possible. One problem with two-grade schools is that students attending those schools attend three different schools and make two transitions from one school to another in a period of less than four calendar years. It is important to recognize, however, that the barriers inherent in having two-grade middle schools can and have been overcome by many such schools across the nation.

Decreases in the number of grades 7-9, 7-8, and K-8 schools have been paralleled by increasing numbers of grades 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). Data from a recent national survey of 1,423 middle and junior high school principals also reflect the support of educators for grades 6-8 middle schools. When these administrators were asked their opinion about the ideal grade organization for middle schools, only 3% favored the grades 7-9 junior high school plan. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the principals responding to this the survey believed that grades 6-8 middle school best served young adolescents (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002, p.12). Principals responding to the study were also asked their opinions about the most developmentally responsive district pattern. Sixty-two percent (62%) of all respondents indicated that K-5, 6-8, 9-12 was the best plan. An additional 14% favored the K-4, 5-8, 9-12 plan. The two district level plans respondents considered the least developmentally responsive were K-8, 9-12 (1%), and K-12 (0%) (p.13).





Grade Organization Trends (continued)

The view that K-8 schools are considered one of the least appropriate grade organizations for the education of young adolescents is reflected in the decreasing number of these schools over the last several decades. For example, there were 5,552 Pre K/K-8 schools in 1988 and only 4,332 in 2001 (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Market Data Retrieval, 2001). This trend may be surprising to some because of the highly publicized reorganization of several districts from middle schools to the K-8, 9-12 plan (Harrington-Lueker, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The vast majority of the school districts in the nation continue to organize schools into the three-tier organizational plan. The most common district organizational plan is grades K-5, 6-8, 9-12. This plan, along with the K-4, 5-8, and 9-12 plan, receives wide support from those responsible for the education of young adolescents. Significant decreases in the numbers of grades 7-9 junior high schools as well as less dramatic decreases in grades 7-8 middle school and the grades K-8 elementary school have occurred. The premise that young adolescents need and deserve a school devoted exclusively to their education and welfare is widely accepted by educators, policy makers, parents, and other stakeholders across the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grade organization decisions should be driven by the developmental characteristics, needs, and interests of young adolescents rather than by expediency. When possible, middle schools should house grades 5-8 or 6-8. These grade levels should be included because they are the grades in which young adolescents are typically enrolled. Placing these youth in schools that focus directly and exclusively on their needs and interests increases the chance that they will be more successful learners during a challenging time of their development.

Having young adolescents in a school designed exclusively for them allows all professionals at the school to focus directly and fully on providing the best learning opportunities possible. Educators in separately organized middle schools do not have to divide their energies between two or more developmental age groups (e.g., young children and young adolescents in grades K-8 elementary schools).

When separately organized middle schools are not possible, steps should be taken to establish "middle schools within schools" so that programs and practices that benefit young adolescents can be implemented to the fullest extent possible.

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A Bona Fide Middle School: Programs, Policy, Practice, and Grade Span Configurations

What Current Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner



David Hough

Five important findings can be drawn from the research literature accompanying middle school programs, policies, and practice (i.e., components) and grade span: (1) components are generally conceptualized in a similar, agreed-upon fashion by most middle school scholars, (2) these same components do enhance student achievement, (3) grade span does make a difference in student achievement, (4) the number of schools in the United States implementing middle school components around a 6,7,8 grade span continues to grow, and (5) research is just now beginning to provide necessary data to help researchers ask the "right" questions leading to definitive answers for the first time ever.

Middle school components are most often conceptualized as teams of teachers meeting during a *common planning* time to (among other things) develop *integrated curricula* and teach within the structure of a *flexible schedule* that allows for more in-depth study and experiential learning. *Advisory* programs are provided in an effort to establish positive relationships between young adolescents and adults, ensuring that students are known well by at least one adult. Students are encouraged to participate in *intramural* activities to build self-esteem and promote healthy life-styles. *Exploratory* classes or enrichment experiences are provided to allow students a chance to experiment with novel subject matter and interest areas without fear of being penalized by a letter grade. And all of the above are accomplished within *small heterogeneous learning communities* that emphasize *cooperative* teaching strategies that capitalize on the social dimension of teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND

Discussions surrounding middle level programs, policies, practice, and grade span configurations spawn some of the most frequently asked questions about middle level education. Chief among these (and underlying the entire middle level education movement) are questions associated with the impact of middle school components and grade span on student outcomes, especially academic achievement. While research on middle level education programs, policies, and practice (i.e. components) has increased over the past two-and-a-half decades, virtually all studies have focused on the following: (a) ways to design and implement middle school components effectively, (b) the impact of this change process on teachers, teaching, and overall school organization, (c) student affect and/or teacher/principal perceptions of outcomes (Hough, 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1991d; Irvin, 1992).

Before 1996, not enough empirical data had been collected to show conclusive evidence that any given combination of middle school components implemented within any given grade span configuration impacted student achievement (Hough, 1991d; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). This is not to say that middle school components have no relationship to grade span. They do. However, until recent efforts guided by comprehensive empirical data, too much past research had been based on only a few studies that had concentrated on a single program, policy, or practice (Hough, 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1991d; Irvin, 1992; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Melton, 1984), leaving too much to speculative theory and incipient understandings instead of scientific fact - the latter of which is now the central focus (Felner, 1996).





Bona fide "middle schools" can and do differ greatly in the number and type of components operationalized at varying degrees; however, all should exhibit specific programs, policies, and practice that meet the diverse physical, social, emotional, moral, cognitive needs of young adolescents. These learners ranging roughly between 10 and 14 years of age are most often, but not always, found in grades six, seven, and eight; some may be found in the fifth grade, while others may be in the ninth grade, due to differing rates of maturation. This wide range of diverse development adds to the component/grade span-outcomes conundrum.

Relationships among and between components and grade span to student achievement is measurable; however, the direct, indirect, and interactive paths of these relationships are just now being understood by researchers. Preliminary findings indicate that the paths are seldom direct, but that they almost always interact with one or more other variables and in concert do favorably impact student achievement when implemented conscientiously over time (Felner, 1996). The plausibility of middle level education, then, necessitates broad definitions of a variety of far-ranging components and outcomes.

RATIONALE

A bona fide middle school is not an organizational structure consisting of a specific grade level configuration, set of components, and name that includes the word *middle*. It is, however, any organizational structure consisting of developmentally appropriate programs, policies, and practice tailored to maximize young adolescent learning while nurturing affect (Clark & Clark, 1993; Cuban, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1989; Johnston, 1984; Romano & Georgiady, 1994). A number of demographic variables peculiar to a specific school community make an impact on middle level organizational structures (Becker, 1987; Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1995a; 1995b; Hough & Irvin, 1995), and these factors do influence types, degrees and levels of implementation that make a difference in learning outcomes, including achievement and socialization (Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1995b; Hough & Sills-Briegel, in press).

While middle school components most often refer to programs, policies, and practice perceived to hold promise as effective ways to facilitate learning and affect, not unlike other innovations in education or any other field, many of the effects or outcomes have yet to be fully substantiated through empirical research (Hough, 1995a; 1995b; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). Even though lack of data regarding the effects of change prior to full implementation over time is not uncommon in any field of study, some have misconstrued incipient or incomplete data and used same as grounds for opposing middle level education ideals. Too often, well-meaning groups use "ipso facto" logic to challenge the efficacy of new approaches. In an effort to ensure the highest quality education possible for their children, parents and school boards sometimes associate declining test scores, for example, with what they may perceive to be a "warm-fuzzy" curriculum infused with advisory and exploratory classes that detract from time that could be devoted to more rigorous "basics." In an extreme example, some have been led to believe that middle level education has caused schools in rural communities to consolidate and believe, further, that consolidation is detrimental to children (see, e.g., DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995). In reality, while varied, middle level education programs, policies, and practice have more often been viewed as reform initiatives to be implemented after consolidation had already taken place. And many of these initiatives share



basic philosophical and operational similarities with middle school components that are grounded in research theory and composed of equally varied orientations, approaches, and methodologies (Cuban, 1993; Hough, 1995a; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

In addition to descriptive data used to identify middle school components, two premises undergird the research/theory used to determine grade levels most often found to be appropriate for inclusion in middle schools. The first premise holds that early adolescence is a separate developmental stage situated between childhood and adolescence. The second premise holds that appropriate programs, policies, and practice designed to meet young adolescent needs are difficult to generalize to grade levels because differing rates of maturation are highly individual between childhood and adolescence. Therefore, it would follow that the most prudent approach to the grade configuration issue is to develop a bona fide middle school first, then determine which children are at the young adolescent stage before assigning them to grades in that organizational structure. Too often in the past, the reverse has been tried, i.e., grouping students by grade level (vertical articulation) and then trying to manufacture solutions to fit whatever resulting grade span configuration emerges - usually as a result of administrative expediency in reaction to facilities utilization (e.g., Alexander, 1988; Johnston, 1984). This latter approach has not met with high levels of success (e.g., Hough, 1989; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). The former, however, is just now being tried in enough locales nationally to allow for empirical research to be conducted among truly different school types (Hough & Irvin, 1995).

PROGRAMS, POLICIES, PRACTICE = COMPONENTS

Middle school components can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. One very general rubric classifies all components as either curricular, co-curricular, or extramural programs. More often, middle level researchers, scholars, and practitioners refer to a list of programs, policies, and practice that often vary in number from six to twelve (e.g., Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; Romano & Georgiady, 1994). Among the most common are advisory, intramurals, teaching teams with common planning time, flexible (usually block) scheduling, integrated curricula (multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary), and exploratory classes. Each of these, as well as additional "components," are discussed in some depth throughout this volume.

Since 1989, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) has been the catalyst for development of both components and blueprints for designing and implementing bona fide middle schools throughout the United States (e.g., Oakes, Serna, & Guiton, 1996). Using *Turning Points* as a blueprint, many schools have developed and implemented a variety of programs, policies, and practices that focus on the following: creating small communities for learning in which every student is known well by at least one adult; designing and teaching a common core of academics that centers around literacy, the sciences, critical thinking, healthy life-styles, ethical behavior, and citizenship in a pluralistic society; ensuring success for all students by eliminating tracking by achievement while promoting cooperative learning and flexible instructional time; empowering teachers and administrators; exerting more centralized control over instruction leading to high levels of measurable performance; staffing middle grades with teachers who have been specially prepared to teach young adolescents; improving academic performance through fostering health and fitness; reengaging families through meaningful roles and school governance; and connecting school with communities by forming partnerships that are mutually responsible for students' success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).



In addition, a new blueprint, *Great Transitions* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1996), published as the fourth and concluding report of the Carnegie Task Force on Education and Young Adolescence, along with a new position paper from National Middle School Association (NMSA), *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995), may very well become the next catalysts for middle level school improvement by providing innovative ways of viewing the components of a middle school. Using *This We Believe* as a guide, middle schools would design programs, policies, and practice addressing the following: curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory; varied teaching and learning approaches; assessment and evaluation that promote learning; flexible organizational structures; health, wellness, and safety; comprehensive guidance and support services (NMSA, 1995).

An encouraging facet of the NMSA rubric of reform is that, regardless of how programs, policies, and practices are fashioned, the middle school components become *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* in nature. This is a marked departure from earlier efforts to replicate components across schools. The descriptive nature of these middle school components guards against proselytizing or attempts to routinize charismatic reform initiatives. Instead, the NMSA recommendations concentrate on customized components to meet individual school improvement plans in conjunction with community needs and preference. While site-based initiatives are welcome, "customization" adds to the methodological complexities presented researchers studying the effect of components and grade span on student outcomes, including achievement.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPONENTS AND GRADE SPAN

Before the mid 1980s, designing a "middle school" had traditionally involved grouping students by grade level (e.g., 7-8, 6-8, 7-9) and changing the name of the school from *junior high* to *middle school*. Numerous descriptive studies have documented this reorganization movement and have examined changing demographics by grade level configuration, usually noting decreases in the number of 7-9 and K-6 schools coupled with increases in the number of K-5 and 6-8 schools (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Hough 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) and verified by McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins (1995), the following data were identified for the most common grade spans housing a seventh-grade in 1993:

NUMBER AND PERCENT OF MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS IN 1993 BY GRADE SPAN			
Grade Span	Number of Schools	Percent of Total	Past 20 Years % of Change
5-8	1,223	11%	+53%
6-8	6,115	55%	+293%
7-8	2,412	22%	+ 5%
7-9	1,424	13%	-91%



If one begins by examining the seventh grade and then expands the examination in a direction either toward higher grade levels included in the school's overall configuration or toward lower grade levels, a clear pattern emerges. As higher grades are included, say the 8th and 9th, programs, policies, and practices tend to be more subject centered. Fewer components are operational and at lower levels. As lower grades are included, say the 6th and 5th, programs, policies, and practices tend to be more student-centered. More components are generally operational and at a higher level in schools with these lower grades including K-8 schools (Hough, 1995a). In short, there is a relationship between components and grade span.

The above is an important finding whenever one considers how most young adolescent students are grouped for instruction. More than 35 different grade span configurations contain a seventh grade. Of these, seven are common enough to warrant attention (PK/K/1 - 8, 4-8, 5-8, 6-8, 7-8, 7-9, 7-12), and four grade spans (5-8, 6-8, 7-8, 7-9) house almost 90% of all seventh-grade students (Hough, 1995b).

Most recently, attention has focused on programmatic and policy changes that seek to effect changes in practice. As a result, young adolescent teaching-learning dimensions have been determined to be more closely aligned to elementary schooling than to secondary schooling (Epstein, 1990; Hough 1995a; Mac Iver, 1990; Melton, 1984; Scales & McEwin, 1994). Many states have changed their teaching certification requirements to reflect this shift. Instead of being an "add-on" to the secondary certificate, middle level teaching certification is becoming more closely aligned to the elementary program, or it is a stand-alone program (McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996). These developments have led to closer scrutiny of appropriate grade level configurations, especially placement of fifth, sixth, and ninth grade students.

Regardless of their grade span placement, young adolescents should not be thrust into an inappropriate learning environment. The most prudent approach is to develop appropriate programs, policies, and practices for young adolescents first, then place students into the resulting organizational structure.

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Fifth Grade in the Middle School? Yes!

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Reene A. Alley

As a former principal of a 5-8 middle school, my experience has shown me that it is appropriate that fifth grade be included in the middle school program. Programming for fifth grade students can provide an opportunity which satisfies both student developmental needs and the need of the school to provide transition from one learning setting to another. Compton (1990) states that "the failure to provide for the in-between age in the elementary school is not so much because of the theory of its approach as its practice" (p. 37).

Appropriately planning for the inclusion of fifth grade students in the middle school setting can assure that recognition of their uniqueness occurs. Therefore, before the decision to move fifth grade to the middle school is made, questions need to be answered by decision-makers:

1. What effect will the movement of the fifth grade into the middle school have on the elementary school?
2. What programming and services can the middle school provide students that are not currently being provided in the elementary school?
3. What programming and services currently provided for these students in the elementary school can be adapted appropriately for the middle school program?
4. What special services need to be considered that appropriately can assist the fifth grade student in assimilating into the middle school program?
5. What considerations need to be made for the physical placement of the fifth grade in the middle school building? What changes need to occur in facility arrangements?
6. What will be the new structure of the middle school so that resources can be appropriately organized and allocated?
7. How will the plan for developmental programming for the 5-8 middle school occur to assure that its components are interrelated and interdependent, but yet uniqueness is supported?
8. What needs to be done to assure agreement and commitment of the middle school stakeholders for the change?
9. What redefinition of roles needs to occur due to changing responsibilities? How will the roles of counselors, principals, and others change due to the movement of fifth graders to the middle school?
10. How will parental concerns over the decision to move fifth grade to the middle school be handled?



Answers to these questions can establish a basis for the fifth grade transition from elementary to middle school. Furthermore, these can serve as the frame within which a rationale can be developed; specifically, one which illustrates the benefits of the transition for students, teachers, and parents.

The rationale should address the need for program change in terms of developmental preparation for emerging adulthood by these students. Beginning with an examination of where these students are now and where they have been provides information that can assist in determining where these students should be going. Building an understanding of the nature of the fifth grader and his or her needs serves as a basis for planning educationally the curricular and organizational changes that a move of this type will require.

A response to questions raised about the functional differences between the fifth grade in the elementary setting and inclusion in the middle school must be prepared:

1. How will students be taught? How should they?
2. How will students be graded? How should they?
3. How will students be included in the total life of the middle school? To what degree will they be involved?
4. Are fifth grade students less accountable than sixth graders?
5. How essential will multi-age grouping be to the fifth grader? In what instances would multi-grade grouping occur? Why?
6. How essential is interdisciplinary learning to the fifth grader? In what instances would interdisciplinary learning occur? On what basis?
7. How essential will advisement/guidance be for the fifth grade student? Why? What would be its purpose? Content?
8. What will be the involvement of fifth grade students in extracurricular activities? Should they be involved? Why? Why not? How/will the athletic program of the middle school be restructured to involve fifth grade students? On what basis will this take place?
9. Will fifth graders have recess?
10. What effect will fifth grade have on special programs in the middle school? Gifted and talented? Special education?
11. What effect will occur on the reading program of fifth grade students when they move to the middle school? Why?



12. What effect will fifth graders have on the special areas of instruction in the middle school?
Music? Art? Others?
13. How will fourth grade students be prepared to effectively cope with the new setting in the middle school?
14. What will be done to assure, inform parents about the middle school program of their fifth grader?

When preparing the rationale, decision makers must be aware of questions raised by teachers regarding their roles and the curriculum for which they will be held accountable.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

1. What will be my role as a fifth grade teacher in the middle school? How will become part of the life of the school? What will be expected of me in my new role? Will there be new aspects of my role that I need to learn? If so, how will I learn and practice them?
2. How essential will teacher teaming be to the fifth grade? Why? How does it fit into the program? How will I be trained for this? What do I give up when I am part of a team?
3. How are decisions made in the middle school that affect me and my students? Will this change when fifth grade enters the middle school? If so, how? Does this process differ from grade to grade? If so, how? Why?
4. How will fifth grade teachers be involved in program, curriculum, and staff development?
5. What methods are used to report pupil progress? How do they differ from the elementary school? Who will show me how it is done? What is expected?

CURRICULUM

1. To what degree will competition be encouraged? What role does competition play in programming? With students?
2. With fifth grade in the building, what will be the special focus of their program? How is this focus related to the total program of the middle school? Why?
3. What can the middle school program learn from the elementary school? Why could this be important? How could this benefit the middle school?
4. What philosophical differences exist between a 5-8 middle school and a 6-8 middle school? How can these differences be resolved?
5. How will the guidance/advisement program be organized to include fifth grade students? What will be its program components? Why? How will this program change? On what basis?



Specifically addressing six areas which focus on the uniqueness of the middle school and addressing their impact on the fifth grade student and teacher will strengthen the rationale. These areas are: physical development of students, social development of students, individual learning needs, guidance services, developmental nature of middle school programming, and teachers.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

Since most elementary schools rely heavily on recess time or one or two brief physical education periods weekly to provide opportunities for physical activity for the fifth grade student, the fifth grader in the middle school can benefit from daily opportunities for physical activities particularly if these are organized and instructionally focused on the physical development of the child.

Physically, ten year olds are beginning to grow. Those physical activities which are structured and focused on helping these students understand what is happening in their body, help them develop control of it, and which "fine-tune" their motor skills should be determined. Appropriately planned opportunities for physical activities can help them gain a sense of who they are within a body that is changing. They can begin to understand the "why" of their awkwardness, inability to control their body movements, and learn to accept themselves, therefore supporting the development of a more positive view of the individual in their body. Within the middle school, these students can then participate in activities which support physical skill development without an emphasis on competition.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS

Moving the fifth grade student into a setting in which cooperation is a guiding tenet and within which cooperation is modeled by a team of teachers, assists them in learning social skills, usable with peers and other adults. Havighurst (1990) has noted that:

From the fifth grade on, boys and girls are very much concerned with their abilities to get along with their age-mates in the peer group. They form teams, committees, and clubs and are very much aware of the personalities of people at their age. This is the time for the development of a democratic social relationship, gained by working out the rules of playing and living with one's equals. The middle school is better for this than one in which the 10-11-year-olds are associating with younger children. (p. 29).

Since this time is one in which they are becoming concerned with the feelings of their peers, the environment of the middle school can be viewed as a source of opportunities upon which students can build and support their desire to relate to and interact with peers.

Secondly, personal experience has demonstrated that the similarity of the social needs of fifth and sixth grade students in a middle school can be used advantageously in the school program. It can serve as a basis for planning social activities which are uniquely focused on their social needs, separate from the boy-girl social functions of the seventh and eighth grade. Fifth and sixth grade students enjoy social activities which do not focus on the need to pair up. They like physical activity but quiet times; after-school fun times which include popcorn and movies, bingo, swimming, volleyball are appreciated. By differentiating the types of social activities these students will participate in, the school demonstrates that they are special and unique.



INDIVIDUAL LEARNING NEEDS OF STUDENTS

In the elementary school, one teacher typically outlines the daily and weekly learning schedule and its content. The learning setting in middle school has distinct advantages for student learning. Through the efforts of a team of teachers, students can be grouped and regrouped based on areas of expertise or interest of the members of the team.

The opportunities for remediation can be shared among the members. Opportunities for accelerated learning by individual students can be planned and implemented. I have observed fifth grade students identified for math acceleration successfully complete geometry in the eighth grade. I have seen students requiring remediation make sharp improvement. In each situation, these learning opportunities resulted from the shared efforts of a teaching team. Teacher teams can plan and implement curriculum extensions as well as re-teaching activities. Developing interdisciplinary units which provide students with opportunities for multiple, integrated learning opportunities are also possible in this setting.

GUIDANCE SERVICES

Typically, fifth grade students in the elementary school do not have access to a guidance counselor. When I was a middle school principal, it was not unusual for either the elementary principal or a teacher to ask for assistance from the guidance counselor in the resolution of a problem with a student, the home, or the parent. A major advantage for fifth grade students when included in the middle school is the opportunity for them to participate in and have access to a guidance program and its logical extension of advisement. Epstein and MacIver (1990) support its importance. "Strong programs of homeroom and advisory activities to students in middle grades affect other aspects of the school program and student success in school" (Epstein & MacIver, 1990, p.36).

An appropriately planned guidance program which includes the advisement process can assist fifth grade students to learn to deal with issues in their social environment, their classroom behavior, and learning. The importance of the role that properly trained individuals can play in the lives of the students should be stressed. Fifth grade students are very aware of the world around them. They feel its pressures. The life they experience outside the school, their developing bodies, raise questions in their minds that demand answers. Because they are not yet self-conscious about asking questions and are open to seeking answers, guidance for personal growth is needed.

DEVELOPMENTAL NATURE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

Through its program, the developmental nature of the middle school can be truly demonstrated when fifth grade is included. Differentiating program purpose grade by grade can support students in the development of social, physical, and intellectual skills as they progress in the setting. From fifth grade with its elementary focus to eighth grade with its subject matter/pre-high school preparation, four years would be available within which programs could be organized.



TEACHERS

Removing the elementary teacher from the isolation of a single classroom into one where they will become members of a teaching team has distinct advantages. Each individual can build on an area of personal expertise or interest while receiving support from other members of the team. Through a team effort, greater flexibility in planning learning activities can be achieved. Given ownership of the available learning time, the team can plan its use, grouping of students, and types of activities. Variations in the structure of the classroom setting through directed learning time for students, interdisciplinary learning activities, and independent study can be supported.

Teacher teams and the cooperation implied by membership, reduces isolation and can provide students with a greater variety of learning opportunities and people contact. An effective teaching team, united in their concerns for students, focuses on what is best for their learning, and uses multiple talents, skills, and resources to this end.

SUMMARY

A middle school which includes fifth grade students can advantageously:

1. Improve the "window" of opportunity for developmental middle school programming.
2. Provide a logical break in program by planning activities for fifth and sixth grade different from those for seventh and eighth grade.
3. Serve as a bridge between elementary school and the high school in a setting where a balanced approach to activities supports student acquisition of social skills, and ownership of learning.
4. Support cross-grade level learning activities that provide opportunities for student remediation and acceleration.
5. Break down student tracking patterns used in the elementary school.
6. Encourage professional skill development of teachers through membership in a teaching team.
7. Introduce students to appropriate physical skill development which benefits them personally, socially, and physically.
8. Provide specialized guidance services which assist in social skill development.
9. Create an environment that will support continued student interest in and liking of school.
10. Provide additional time to build parental support for middle school programming and intent while helping them prepare for the child's future.

Building a rationale for moving the fifth grade to the middle school from the elementary is only the beginning of the transition process.



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Middle School Configurations II:

Questions & Research

Why is the 5-8 grade level configuration accepted by middle school educators?

- In New York State's *Essential Elements of Standards-Focused Middle-Level Schools and Programs*, it is recommended that middle-level schools should "Contain at least three grade levels," and "Be structured to create close, sustained relationships between students and teachers." (New York State, 2000)
- New York State's curriculum outlines and assessment schedules are based on a K-4, 5-8, 9-12 structure.
- Many researchers and practitioners claim that 5th graders would benefit from inclusion in the middle school (Alley, 1992; Jenkins & McEwin, 1992), contending greater similarities between 5th and 6th graders and 7th and 8th graders (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, Kealy, 1968). Jenkins and McEwin (1992) concluded their study of programs and practices in three grade organizations (K-6, K-8, and 5-8), "Therefore, ...it is recommended that fifth graders be either placed at 5-8 middle schools or be provided with more appropriate curriculum in K-5 or K-6 schools" (p.13). (Research Summary #8, "Grade 5 in the Middle School," National Middle School Association, 1997).
- The 6-8 configuration is most preferred by middle level educators because it is more likely to include the key characteristics of recommended programs and practices for young adolescents. However, it was also found that 5-8 schools, although less numerous, were about as likely to have these characteristics as grades 6-8 ones. (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; National Middle School Association, 1997).
- Educators believe that at least three years in one setting helps to increase continuity of program, student affiliation with the school and its staff, and a more personalized learning experience. Conversely, in a two year middle school, 50% of the student population is new every year. Students are either transitioning in or out of the school (Toepfer, 1982; Viadero, 1993).
- The time of transition to a new school is critical for young adolescents. Enormous biological, cognitive, and psychological changes mark the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. Biologically, early adolescence is defined by the onset of puberty, a period of growth and development more rapid than any other phase of life except infancy (Berliner, 1993; Carnegie Corporation, 1989; Simmons & Blythe, 1987).

Why is it advantageous for students to be in a school for a minimum of three years?

- In studies of middle school student transitioning, it was found that the most dramatic drop in GPA was for students who experienced a school change between grades six and seven (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).
- Students thrive in a caring school-community. Continuity is an important construct in the creation of such an environment. Noddings (1992) describes continuity in the context of the relationship between teachers and students over time.
- Schools should be places where students know and are known by the adults. This comes with an extended experience (Alder, N.I. & Moulton, M.R. , 1998; Carnegie Corporation, 1989).
- Multiple and frequent school transitions hamper academic performance and student motivation (National Middle School Association, 1997).
- When comparing the academic performance of students who make two school transitions before reaching high school to others who had to make but one transition, it was revealed that the GPA of the "two transition" groups were consistently lower (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).
- In a recent analysis of studies of student academic performance following a transition to a new school, the most significant drop occurred in the seventh grade when that was the first year of the new school experience (Mullins & Irvin, 2000).
- Findings of some researchers indicate that self-ratings of academic competence decline after transition (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992).

- The transition to the middle school is stressful for many students, especially girls, and can be accompanied by increases in psychological symptoms and declines in feelings of self-worth and in school performance (Fenzel, 2000).
- Adolescents experience stress when they are required to cope with multiple changes concurrently. The timing of school change with other life events may exacerbate the development of stress, adjustment difficulties, and problem behaviors (Berliner, 1993). Therefore, it is recommended that students have time to make the transition to the middle school before the onset of puberty, not in the midst of it (Berliner, 1993; MacGiver, 1990).

Where are there similar school districts with a 5-8 configuration?

- U. S.: 1300 5-8 schools
- N. Y. S.: 99 5-8 schools

Westport, CT
 Bernardsville, NJ
 Upper Saddle River, NJ
 Allendale, NJ
 Old Bethpage, LI, NY
 Fayetteville-Manilus, Syracuse area, NY (2 schools)*
 Jamesville-Dewitt, Syracuse area, NY
 Williamsville, Buffalo area, NY (4 schools)*
 Nanuet, Rockland County, NY
 Ardsley, Westchester*
 Byram Hills, Westchester*
 Hastings-On-Hudson, Westchester
 Mamaroneck, Westchester
 Pleasantville, Westchester*

* In group of top 25 performing schools on NYS 8th grade assessments.

How will Chappaqua students benefit from two small 5-8 schools?

- This configuration will provide regionalized middle schools.
- The number of extracurricular and interscholastic activities will double. (For example: two newspaper clubs, two jazz ensembles, two Mathcounts, two Leadership clubs, two bands, etc.) Student participation is likely to be enhanced.
- There is overwhelming research to support the notion that small schools are more effective in creating personalized and intimate learning experiences for students. Having two 5-8 middle schools of approximately 750 students disperses students in such a way that a small school environment is created; whereas, the two two-year school configuration poses the issue of a high concentration of students at a particular grade level. Such a concentration presents some of the issues of the large school, all of which are exacerbated by the brevity of the two year experience.
- With a lower grade level enrollment (upper 180 per grade level) in each school, students are more likely to develop a sense of being known by others in the building; whereas, when the grade level consists of upwards of 360, this becomes more challenging. Moreover, it is more difficult for staff to identify, assess, and prescribe for student needs, especially in a duration of only two years.
- Parents are more likely to have siblings together in a single building with a four-grade middle school. Had the Board selected the two, two-year middle school option, parents with two or more children may have faced a challenging time managing their children's schedules. With the 5/6, 7/8 option, four schools would cover a six-grade level span. A family with three or four children could have children in three or four schools in the district.
- Being in a school for four years allows students an opportunity to compare their developmental growth against younger and older students.
- Having the 5-8 configuration enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of curriculum articulation and staff communications during the middle school experience.
- Being in one place for four years allows students to settle in during a time when they need to attend to a change in academics, social growth, and extracurricular interests. Instead of worrying about orientation and transition during the critical 6th and 7th grade years, students will have already established a comfort level with the school's culture and organization.

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Chappaqua Central School District
Spring 2000

"Multiple and frequent school transitions hamper academic performance and student motivation..."

NMSA-1997

"There is no educational advantage to the two year middle school. Its creation is usually based on logistical issues."

**Dr. Conrad Toepfer,
S.U.N.Y. At Buffalo
Middle-level author & consultant**

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NMSA Research Summary #8

Grade 5 in the Middle School

Question: What research supports grade 5 (and/or grade 6) being included in middle schools?

Due to the large percentage of public school students (88%) who make the transition into the middle grades in a new building (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992), the research area of transition for young adolescents has received some attention. However, most studies of school-transition target grade 6 for the sample population and do not address the appropriateness of grade 5's inclusion in elementary or middle schools. Aside from district considerations of building capacities, zoning, and enrollments, research centers on the match between the developmental status of fifth/sixth graders and the setting of the host school, the effects of transition on the students, and school programs to familiarize the student with the new school environment.

As a result, the "direct" answer to the question emerges as "It depends." There is a lack of empirical research, but in general, fifth grade inclusion depends on (1) the student and (2) the program. If the student is ready and the school is a bona fide middle school, then fifth grade might be appropriate even in the absence of empirical research.

The Issue

Two questions warrant attention: (1) Do 5th graders exhibit behaviors and characteristics that would benefit from participation in a responsive middle level environment or would they benefit more from the traditional self-contained environment of the elementary school? (2) Do 5th graders possess characteristics to withstand the transition from elementary to middle schools?

Many researchers and practitioners claim that 5th graders would benefit from inclusion in the middle school (Alley, 1992; Jenkins & McEwin, 1992), contending greater similarities between 5th and 6th graders and 7th and 8th graders (Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, Prescott, Kealy, 1968). Jenkins and McEwin (1992) concluded their study of programs and practices in three grade organizations (K-6, K-8, and 5-8), "Therefore,... it is recommended that fifth graders be either placed at 5-8 middle schools or be provided with a more appropriate curriculum in K-5 or K-6 schools" (p.13).

However, the debate centers not only on the age-related characteristics of fifth graders, but on the educational setting of the receiving school. Although middle schools are planned to create learning environments for young adolescents, many schools for adolescents do not implement recognized practices appropriate for young adolescents. Epstein (1990) reported that more developmental responsive practices are found in middle school grade configurations (6-8 and 7-8) than junior high schools (7-9) and middle/high combination schools (7-12). McEwin and others (1996) concluded that in general 5-8 schools have higher implementation levels than other organizations of programs and practices that provide a better match between characteristics and needs of most fifth graders. The issue therefore relates to the match between the characteristics of the young adolescents, the type of pedagogy at the new location, and contextual variables.

Stresses of Adolescence

The issue is complex for several reasons. First, the developmental rate of young adolescents is not uniform, where high stress for one youngster may be optimal challenge and stimulation for another, such a transition is accompanied by a plethora of new stresses inherent in making adjustments to new teachers, expectations, schedules, and classmates. These additional changes coincide with the developmental factors of young adolescence. Fifth graders enter an age of simultaneously adjusting to puberty, an increased capacity for abstract thought, and social changes with peers and authority figures. Some students are also adjusting to family moves, divorces, deaths in the family, and other high stressors. When several of these adjustments occur at the same time as a move to a new school stress is the result.

Developmental Level

Young adolescents have been maturing at an earlier age, resulting in the 6th graders of the 1900's being similar to the 5th graders of the 1990's. Furman and Luke (1992) referred to the early maturation studies of Eichhorn and Tanner that documented the young adolescent's increase in "size, concern about appearance, interest in opposite sex, greater social consciousness and desire of independence" at a younger age (p.4).

Type of Middle School

Although elementary school settings are uniformly termed "nurturing," "child centered," and "self-contained," descriptions of middle school learning environments are inconsistent. Middle schools may implement enabling practices, such as interdisciplinary teaching, thematic units, flexible scheduling, and flexible grouping to address student needs. On the other hand, middle schools may mirror traditional high school departmentalization, 50 minute classes, and ability groupings. Some middle schools are organized to create a gradual transition from self-contained to departmental configuration. For example, the fifth grade is self-contained, the sixth grade has 2 person teams, the seventh has 2-3 person teams with larger blocks of time, and the eighth grade has 4 or more teachers each specializing in a subject area. With such a variety of middle school configurations, any discussion of transition therefore examines the substance of the setting young adolescents are entering before addressing the appropriate grade of transition.

A Rationale for 5th Grade Inclusion

Alley (1992) built a rationale for including 5th grade in middle school by addressing the benefits to students and teachers in six areas: (1) *Physical*: the daily physical activities of a middle grades program focuses on the physical development needs of the 10-14 year span (2) *Social*: the cooperation, teaming arrangements, and social activities of a middle school addresses the young adolescents need for socialization and interaction with peers (3) *Individual Learning Needs*: the teams of teachers, variety in grouping patterns, opportunities for remediation, and integrated learning units, and acceleration as part of a middle school target the learning needs of fifth graders (4) *Guidance*: the guidance services and advisory programs at a middle school provide assistance to students on a personal level, either individual or in a small group setting (5) *The developmental nature of middle school programming*: middle school programs, such as exploratory, flexible scheduling, and varied instructional methods accommodate characteristics of young adolescents and target their needs (6) *Teachers*: students benefit from teachers working together, planning activities, groupings, and advising students as a team, as compared to the traditional isolation of elementary classroom teachers.

Other Options

The concern that inclusion of 5th grade in a K-6 or K-8 school may incorporate the danger of a pedagogy focused on younger children has been addressed in a variety of ways. Hough (1995) proposed the elemiddle school that include both primary and middle grades as a student-centered structure for preadolescents. Furman and Luke (1992) described a district decision to divide the middle school into two divisions, one for grades five and six and one for grades seven and eight.

Associated Factors of Transition

Several researchers have looked at the effects of the transitions to new schools and reported on a variety of related factors. Most effects were found to be negative with some differences between genders. The decline in motivation and performance, and loss of self-esteem particularly in girls was reported by Simmons & Blythe (1989). Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, and Ebata (1989) noted the negative impact of transition, particularly two transitions, on course grades and somewhat on self-image. Alspaugh and Harting (1995) found a decline in school grade level achievement means during the transition years for all grade level transitions from self-contained classrooms to departmentalized classes, with the schools recovering the losses in the following years. Eccles and Midgley (1989) reported a decline in motivation and performance after the transition and an increase in social comparisons in the schools. Elias and his colleagues (1992) looked at the link between difficulties in transition, self-concept, and perceived competence, finding that boys and girls value peer relationship, with boys having more conflict with authority and academic tasks. Fenzel (1989), on the other hand, in a suburban community study found that transition strain decreased during the middle level school transition with positive relationships with teachers and peers contributing most to the decrease. Boys, he noted, experienced reduced strain in the middle school environment "that responded less antagonistically to their aggressiveness and restlessness" (p. 224). He concluded that findings about the school-transition stress depended on community context and characteristics of students and their families. Other researchers propose that the ability to adjust to the stresses of transition are dependent on the amount of resources the student brings with him/her to school, such as family support, self-esteem, and perceptions of competence.

Decisions about which grades are included in a school are important and should be made carefully. Research repeatedly confirms the importance of the type of program and qualities of the learning environments, not grade organization, as the key to successful experiences for 5th graders (Jenkins & McEwin, 1992; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990).

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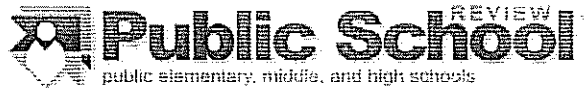
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Should Sixth Grade Be in Elementary School or Middle School?

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Written by Grace Chen

Sixth grade has been described as a major crossroads of a child's development. Thus, it would seem important to place sixth graders in the proper environment during this critical period. Curiously, a decades-long debate continues regarding whether sixth graders are better off in elementary school or middle school. After looking at common characteristics of sixth graders, this article examines the pros and cons for each approach. Although a 2007 study concluded that sixth graders in elementary school behave and test better than sixth graders in middle school, 75 percent of school districts in the U.S. place sixth graders in middle school. Moreover, school district decisions to place sixth grade in elementary or middle school are sometimes based on purely financial considerations. The article concludes with some tips for parents who are concerned about sending their sixth graders to middle school.

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What Are Sixth Graders Like?

Educators agree that sixth graders are an unusually diverse group to which few generalizations apply. They are all

moving from childhood to adolescence, but each one seems to moving at a different pace. Here are some milestones that parents can expect as their children approach and enter sixth grade:

- Children mature physically around the time of sixth grade. Girls become concerned about their physical appearance as their bodies begin to change. Boys may gain a lot of height and may start to shave. These physical changes often occur before children develop the emotional maturity to deal with them.
- Girls mature physically sooner than boys.
- Children begin to notice boys and girls of the opposite sex and feel attracted to them in ways they may not understand.
- A child's peer group becomes more important than his or her family. Peer pressure becomes a powerful force. Some distance may grow between the child and the parents.
- Children experience emotional changes that may leave them confused, angry, or rebellious.
- Children may show maturity in some ways and remain completely childish in other ways.
- Compared to prior generations, sixth graders today are exposed to more adult experiences at earlier ages.
- Some sixth graders are sexually active or have experimented with drugs or alcohol.

The Debate

Given all the physical and emotional changes that are going on in the lives of sixth graders, would they be better off as the highest grade in elementary school or as the lowest grade in middle school? Elementary school and middle schools differ in many aspects. In elementary schools, sixth graders spend most of the day with the same teacher and classmates in the same classroom. There is less freedom because the students are carefully monitored. In contrast, middle school children have several teachers for different subjects and move from classroom to classroom throughout the day. Middle schools allow more freedom because the faculty and staff have less opportunity to monitor them the students. Middle schools stress academic achievement more

than elementary schools.

Sixth graders were moved between elementary schools and middle schools throughout the 20th century. At first, sixth graders attended elementary school with grades one through eight. Then schools began to cut off elementary school at grade six. Seventh through ninth graders were placed in a junior high or middle school, which was supposed to bridge the gap between elementary and high schools. In 1970, only 25 percent of sixth graders were placed in middle schools. During the 1970's through 2000, however, millions of sixth graders were transferred to middle schools and ninth graders were moved to high schools. Seventy-five percent of sixth graders nationwide now go to middle school. The tide may be turning again, however, in favor of returning sixth graders to elementary school.

Factors Favoring Sixth Grade in Elementary School

- *Sixth graders in middle school have more behavioral problems than their peers in elementary school.* In a highly-regarded 2007 study of public school students in North Carolina, a group at Duke University's Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy looked at behavior to evaluate whether sixth graders were better off in elementary school or middle school. After appropriate adjustments for socioeconomic and demographic factors, the study showed that sixth graders attending elementary school were less likely to have discipline problems than their middle school counterparts. Moreover, the discrepancy in discipline problems continued through the eighth and ninth grades. Studies have shown that disciplinary problems correspond with low academic achievement.
- *Sixth graders in elementary school test higher than those in middle school.* The Duke study also considered test scores. The researchers found that sixth graders in elementary school scored higher than their peers in middle school on standardized end-of-grade tests. A recent study in the Philadelphia the school system concurred with the Duke study. According to school superintendent Paul Vallas, the study showed that sixth graders in elementary schools perform better on standardized tests than those in middle schools. In response, Philadelphia is reducing the number of middle schools from 46 to eight and placing the sixth graders in elementary schools.
- *Sixth graders in middle school are exposed to older teens*

which may have a negative influence on them. Children in the sixth grade are at a point in their lives when they are easily influenced by their peers. Keeping the sixth graders in elementary school gives them another year to mature before they are exposed to older adolescents

- *Middle schools are usually larger than elementary schools.* Rightly or wrongly, middle schools have reputation of seeming large, uninviting, and impersonal. Middle schools have been referred to as the lost stepchildren of the education system. Many parents and teachers believe that sixth graders do better in a smaller, more nurturing setting where there are fewer classmates and more one-on-one contact with the teacher.

- *Middle schools tend to be located further away from home than elementary schools.* Probably because there are fewer middle schools than elementary schools, many parents find that the middle school is further away from home than the elementary school. They do not like the idea of their sixth graders being so far away. They also question whether a longer commute is appropriate for sixth graders.

Factors in Favor of Sixth Grade in Middle School

- *Sixth graders in middle school have greater access to extracurricular activities.* In one Michigan school district, the sixth grade will be moved to middle school beginning the 2008-2009 school year. The officials noted that at middle school the sixth graders would have access to more extracurricular activities, such as art, band, music, and athletics. It was also noted, however, that the restructuring would allow the middle school to service 50 more students in the same building with three less teachers.

- *Placing sixth grade in middle school allows sixth graders more independence.* Another school district recently announced that sixth grade would move to middle school in order to give sixth graders more independence. The district had tried to make the change a year before, but opposition from parents caused a delay.

- *Middle schools may offer innovative programs in which sixth graders may be eager to participate.* Parents of students in one school district in Ohio were excited about enrolling their sixth graders in an expanded middle school because of the school's innovative programs. The school admitted only 25 students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth

grades. Students, who are allowed to study at their own pace, are grouped by age levels rather than grade levels. The classes are divided into smaller advisory groups in which one adult mentor remains with the students for three years.

What Do Kids Think?

Right before fifth graders in a Michigan elementary school were going to start sixth grade in middle school, the board of education decided to move the sixth grade from middle school to the elementary school. So, children who had anticipated going to middle school had to adjust to the fact that they were remaining in their elementary school. The change was made as part of a restructuring plan to reduce costs. Later, the children were interviewed about their experience. Many children admitted that they were disappointed on first learning of the change. After completing sixth grade, however, most of them were glad that they had one more year in elementary school.

Financial Considerations May Prevail

Sometimes a move of sixth graders from an elementary school to a middle school, or vice versa, is simply a matter of financial necessity. Public school systems all over the country are experiencing cutbacks because of decreased federal and state funding. For example, if the elementary schools are too crowded and the facilities cannot be expanded, a school district may be forced to relocate the sixth graders, especially if there is extra room in the middle schools. There is anecdotal evidence that many schools districts which are moving sixth graders this time are doing so not based on any of the factors considered above but rather because of budgetary constraints or declining enrollment. The following are a few examples.

- A Florida school district moved its fifth grade to middle school in response to declining enrollment.
- A school district in Massachusetts was forced to consider moving the fifth grade from elementary to middle school. Numerous school districts in the state already had fifth graders attending middle school. The reaction by parents, teachers, and school board members was mixed. One school official commented that the move would free up space to offer more programs at the elementary schools.

- Because of budgetary shortfalls, one school district in Maryland closed its only middle school, transferring sixth and seventh grades to elementary schools and ninth grade to a high school. The restructuring saved the district \$4 to \$5 million.
- Sixth grade was added to two Kansas elementary schools to compensate for their declining enrollment.

Tips for Concerned Parents

If your child is attending sixth grade in middle school and you would prefer that the child be in elementary school, here are some suggestions for making the best of it:

- Continue to be as involved in your child's education as you were during the elementary school years.
- Talk with your fifth grader about the differences between elementary and middle schools. Discuss the changes that he or she will experience in middle school.
- Once your child gets his or her schedule, go to the middle school and walk with your child from classroom to classroom according to the schedule. Locate the cafeteria, the restrooms, and the lockers.
- Support a transition program in which fifth graders spend time at the middle school before leaving fifth grade.
- Confirm that the sixth graders are physically separated from the older students in a separate section of the school.

Above all, parents should be informed activists and advocates for their children. If your school district announces that the sixth graders are being moved to middle school and you do not think the move would be in your child's best interests, attend hearings and school board meetings and urge other parents to do so. Be vocal in your opposition. Find out why the school district is proposing the change and suggest alternative solutions. It is not unheard of for school districts to abandon plans in the face of strong parental opposition.

Conclusion

The sixth grade is a critical time in a child's education because it is a time of physical and emotional transition from

childhood to adolescence. The real answer to where a sixth grader belongs depends on the particular sixth grader. There are some children who would be better off in middle school because they are mature enough to deal with the extra challenges. Other sixth graders are unprepared for such a drastic change and need the security of elementary school. When decisions have to be made for whole classes of sixth graders, however, the factors in favor of keeping sixth graders in elementary school seem to outweigh the reasons for placing them in middle school.

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Should Sixth Grade be in Elementary or Middle School? An Analysis of Grade Configuration and Student Behavior, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, Philip J. Cook, Robert MacCoun, Clara Muschkin, and Jacob Vigdor (Feb. 9, 2007)

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Parents line up to get kids into new middle school program, Megan Gildow (March 19, 2008)

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